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THE WHITE CANOE

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William Trumbull

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THE LEGEND

OF

THE WHITE CANOE

—A—

THE WHITE CANOE

BY J. M. W. COLEMAN

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

J. M. W. COLEMAN

AND

THE WHITE CANOE

—A—



*Where the serried waves like chargers madly leaping
to the fray.*

THE LEGEND
OF
THE WHITE CANOE

BY
WILLIAM TRUMBULL

WITH PHOTOGRAVURES FROM DESIGNS BY
F. V. DU MOND

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Long before the solitudes of western New York were disturbed by the advent of the white man, it was the custom of the Indian tribes to assemble occasionally at Niagara, and offer sacrifice to the Spirit of the Falls.

This sacrifice consisted of a white birch-bark canoe, which was sent over the terrible cliff, filled with ripe fruits and blooming flowers, and bearing the fairest girl in the tribe who had just attained the age of womanhood.

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I.

PROEM.

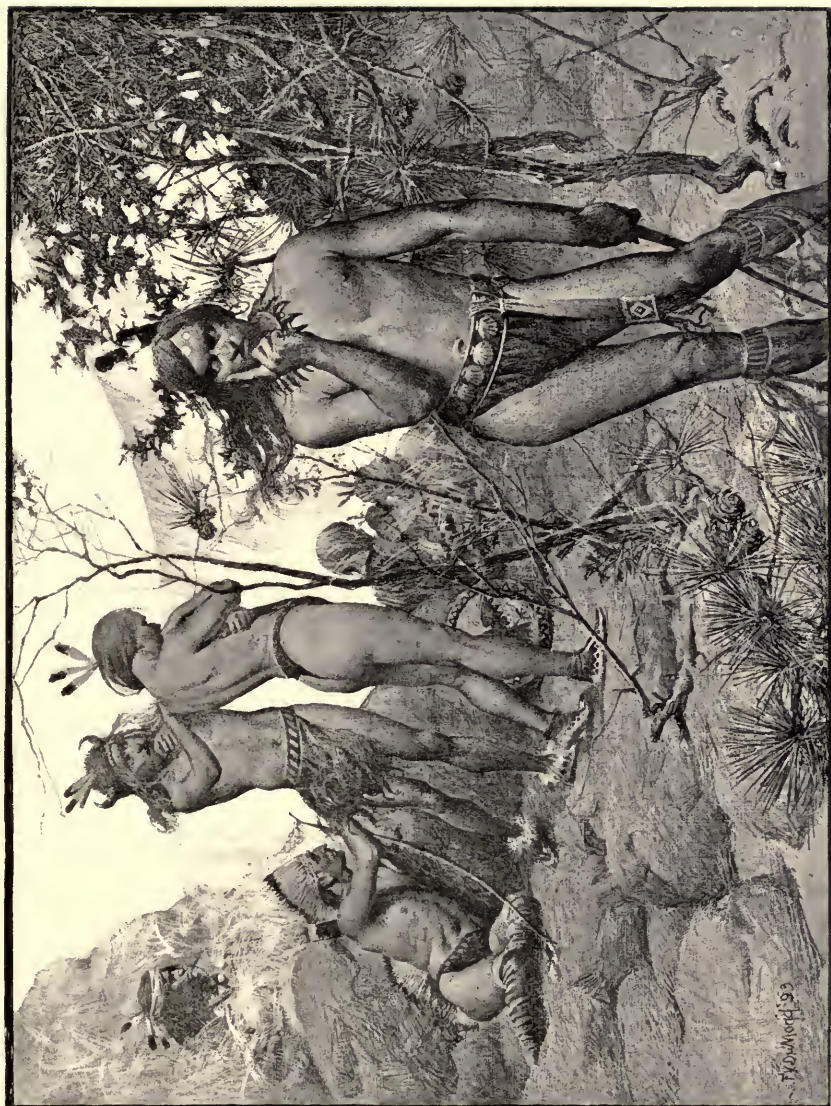
MID the rush of mighty waters, in the thundering
cataract's roar,
Where Niagara's streaming rapids down in headlong
torrent pour ;
Where the serried waves like chargers madly leaping
to the fray,
Fling aloft their snowy crests and toss their manes of
flying spray,
Rearing, plunging, onward urging—Nature's glorious
cavalry !
Where th' eternal sweep of waters like the unending
surge of time,
Pulsing, throbs in rhythmic measure to a wondrous
strain sublime :
Dwells, so ancient legends say, the mighty Spirit of
the Falls,
Who from out the tumult, hoarsely, for unbounded
homage calls.



* * * *As often as they listened, on the voices of the
flood,
Deep were borne the Spirit's mutterings, calling fierce
for human blood.*



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Here the children of the forest, spellbound by that
deafening roar,
Stopped to gaze with listening wonder, in the simpler
days of yore ;
Awe-struck, gazed in silent worship, well beseeming
Nature's child,
As in chase they roamed the plain, or tracked in war
the pathless wild :
And as often as they listened, on the voices of the
flood
Deep were borne the Spirit's mutterings, calling fierce
for human blood ;
Ay, and sacrifice more cruel in that cry they under-
stood :
Gift of Nature's choicest treasure, peerless budding
womanhood !



II.

WENONAH.

FAIREST of the laughing daughters by blue Seneca's rippling tide,
Was the Indian maid, Wenonah, sturdy Kwasind's joy and pride :
Eyes of laughter, like the sunshine dancing in her native lake,
O'er whose depths, anon, fleet shadows chasing cast their trailing wake ;
Lips of tempting ruddy hue like mountain berries gleaming fair ;
Raven locks, whose glossy lustre shone like dark-stemmed maidenhair ;
Whilst rich mantling color tinged an olive cheek, whose crimson flush
Vied with flaming woodland leaves when touched with Autumn's scarlet blush.



*She, hailed queen by all the maidens, led with merriest
quip and song.*

Keep your hands off the money and the money
will be yours.



And the music of her laughter, when amid the joyous
throng,
She, hailed Queen by all the maidens, led with merriest
quip and song,
Fell in sweetest rippling cadence, sounding thro' the
leafy way
Like the purl of hidden brooklet murmuring soft in
distant play ;
As in freest fancy roving, far removed from cares or
strife,
With fresh eager zest exulting in youth's bounding
sense of life,
Bright she moved, a winsome picture, framed by
Nature's matchless art
In all scenes of joy and beauty royally to bear her
part.

Yet to scenes of mirth not solely was her sunny
presence lent ;

Truer was her simple nature, to a nobler purpose bent :
Only child of widow'd father, hers the sacred heritage,
With the charm of winning girlhood, to make bright
his lonely age.

What tho' ardently, nay fiercely, for her smiles the
young braves strove

In all feats of savage daring—none as yet might claim
her love ;

She, with roguish, artless spirit, laughing in her gay
caprice,

Found in loving, filial duty surer joys of heart-whole
peace.

Just as when some sturdy giant of the forest, bending
low,
Bows before the axe and toppling falls with mighty
crashing blow,
Clinging tendrils, newly springing round the shattered
trunk are seen
Swift to hide its prostrate ruin 'neath a veil of living
green,
Guarding, shielding, closely nestling to their riven
parent stock,
Like mute sentient creatures fearful of rude gaze or
heedless mock :
So the maid her lonely father tended with fond, jealous
pride,
Steadfast, faithful to her trust, where none might woo
her from his side.



* * * *Grave attention holds the band.*





III. THE COUNCIL.

GATHERED is the warriors' council. Thro' the shadows of the night,
Darkly gleams each dusky figure in the camp-fire's fitful light.
Slowly round the silent circle moves the red-pipe's gleaming bowl,
Thro' whose clouds each wreath'd sage, peering the dark future to unroll,
Draws a drowsy, sweet contentment, for the moment, o'er his soul.
Now, the brooding hush is broken; grave attention holds the band,
For the Med'cine-man is speaking of the want throughout the land;
Slow, in subtle craft, contrasting with the wealth of happier days
Present dearth of fish and venison, withering blight upon their maize.

Well he speaks! His halting manner but betrays the
deeper art
Of his cunning soul vindictive; which full oft had
conned this part,
Since that day when in dim forest glade Wenonah
spurned his quest,
And with flaming scorn repelled the love his suppliant
words confessed.
Little recked the fearless maiden in that lonely, fateful
hour,
Dark appeal, mute, threatening gesture, hints of baleful
fetich power;
For while untaught reason wavered, blindly groping
toward the light,
Woman's faultless intuition read his lying heart aright!

“Senecas ! Twice the rolling Autumn, with deep-laden
malice fraught,
Years of blight and wasting sickness to your golden
maize hath brought.
Yet again the dread plague threatens ! Speak, deluded,
hapless race,
Will ye, reckless, longer trust th’ uncertain product
of the chase ?
Hunted, driven, the startled red deer, fleeing, vanish
from your sight !
Hark, the cry of fenland wild-geese, parting on their
southward flight !
E’en your lake trout, lurking wary, yield but scanty
livelihood—
Will ye see your children starving ? Answer, Senecas !
Is it good ?



*Came the Spirit of the Waters, wreathed in billowy
clouds of spray.*



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“Listen! To your dreaming Meda, while in troubled
sleep he lay,
Came the Spirit of the Waters, wreathed in billowy
clouds of spray :—
‘Wherefore do My children shun Me? Where the
grateful offering rare
Of the maid and first-fruits choicest, which they once
were wont to bear?
Has *prosperity* thus turned them from the faith of
simpler days?
Let them heed, lest FAMINE seal My warning blight
upon their maize!’
So He spake, with muttered thunderings, leaving me
as one for dead.
Need I counsel? Heed the warning! Yet delay not!
—I have said.”

Ceased the speaker, 'mid a silence, chill, foreboding as
the grave,
Save where some sage, nodding grayhead growl of half-
conviction gave,
As at grim want's threatening horror, fear, by ghastly
memories fed,
Woke to flame the smouldering embers of a cruel faith
nigh dead ;
Or perchance, some young brave, chafing sore in hot,
rebellious mood,
With the first warm flush of manhood 'gainst a bygone
creed of blood,
Carried past his wiser fellows, borne by love's impetuous
stream,
Muttered curse both deep and savage on the Meda's
boding dream !

But all eyes were fixed on Kwasind, Strong Man,
warrior proved and true,
Whose brave heart, where others faltered, never fear
nor weakness knew ;
Hero of a thousand conflicts, scarred in visage, proud
of mien,
Foremost ever in rude battle, chase, or stirring council-
scene :
And their eyes were fixed upon him with a deep,
expectant gaze,
Watching for some answering signal which their
sinking hearts might raise ;
Hope and terror strangely blended in that wistful,
furtive stare,
Not unmixed with curious pity for a father's mute
despair !

Long they sat, in silence waiting. Neither word, nor
sign, nor glance
From the Sachem came in answer to their wondering
look askance.
—Ah! the nameless, unseen terror of that shadowy
Spirit-land,
With its spectral shapes and phantoms,—who its power
can understand?
Now, in sudden wrath he starts at thought of pity from
the rest,
Crushes down the welling tumult surging thro' his
anguished breast,
Cloaks 'neath stoic, outward calm the grief he struggles
to control—
Lest perchance he may betray the finer feelings of his
soul!

There he sits, all wrapped in silence, strangely mute,
impassive grown,
Drawn each stern and rigid feature like carved lines of
chiselled stone ;
Iron will and haughty spirit bravely answering to
repress
Quivering lip and trembling eyelid,—signals of his
deep distress.
See ! he meets their searching glance with head erect
and flashing mien ;
Slowly gazes round the assembly with unflinching air
serene :
Victor in th' unnatural conflict ; love and nature, both
defied ;
Slave to coward superstition ; thrall of idle savage
pride !



*He made known his tidings bitter * * **



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IV.

KWASIND.

NOR when, once the conclave over, striding back
in anger wild
To the hut, where all unconscious of her fate, his
darling child
Rose to greet his late home-coming,—did his flood of
grief long-pent,
In a burst of manlier feeling find, e'en then, its fitting
vent :
But in tones of measured calmness, self-repressed, and
sternly brief,
He made known his tidings bitter to her gaze of
wondering grief ;
Nay, to that grim ordeal, harshly, bade her nerve her
trembling frame,
For the welfare of her people, for the honor of his
name !

Yet, in lonely midnight vigil, when beneath the unwonted
strain,
Baffled nature rose rebellious, throbbing fierce in secret
pain,
Vowed he threat of direst vengeance, breathing forth
an ominous hiss
'Gainst the doting, idle dreamer:—"Curse him, he
shall die for this!"
Or as tenderer feelings, rushing with tumultuous ebb
and roll,
Stirred to ruth the deep recesses of his inmost troubled
soul,
Pity for her youth and beauty, doomed thus soon to
fade and die,
Found expression mute yet touching, in a long-drawn
secret sigh.

Or he dwelt on her obedience, on her silent fortitude,
Bowing to his will submissive, 'neath a blow so harsh
and rude :

And it called to mind her mother, gentle slave of
days long fled,

Slain, alas ! in hostile foray ere *her* noon of life had
sped.

How might she have met this trial ?—What her thought
of him, who must

In the pride of false endurance, thus betray a father's
trust ?

Till proud spirit, bowed in anguish, brooding thro' the
silent night,

Staggered 'neath the strong temptation of a swift,
inglorious flight.

Then, a sterner mood returning, pride resumed its
wonted sway ;
Bade him heed the tribe's opinion ; pictured what his
braves might say :
While he strove, with specious reasoning, which he well
knew for a lie,
To assuage the qualms of conscience—outraged nature's
stifled cry !
Her obedience?—but th' expression of a flattered vanity
At the tribute of the council's silent unanimity !
Or if here, too, justice triumphed, muttered with con-
temptuous thought :
“ After all, she 's but a woman ! ”—and in this a respite
sought.



*Slow was borne into the village by the young braves
of the band.*



So the days dragged slowly onward, days of strife and
 varying mood,
As he watched her steadfast bearing from his gloomy
 solitude :
And one morn, the treacherous Meda, slain by hostile,
 unknown hand,
Slow was borne into the village by the young braves of
 the band.
None mistrusted sullen Kwasind, when the funeral
 throng drew nigh,
Or, at least, none cared to question with that scowling
 warrior by.
But th' event was soon forgotten 'mid the press of other
 calls,
And the stir of preparation for their long march to the
 Falls.



V.

THE SACRIFICE.

COME, at length, the fatal evening—for such purpose, all too soon !

—On a scene of matchless glory slow uprose the harvest moon :

Crested wave and shimmering islet, bathed in flood of golden light,

Caught and threw its tremulous radiance far adown the wind-kissed night ;

Soft the mellow moonbeams glinting thro' the leaves on isle and shore,

Spread beneath, their quivering fretwork, interlaced with shadows o'er ;

Now, the full orb's splendor shining, woke to brilliant glistening play

Myriad hues of emerald richness, showers of sparkling diamond spray.

On the cliffs beyond the cataract, ranged like sentinels
on high,
Giant trees stood darkly shadowed, spectre-like against
the sky ;
Far beneath, the seething river, wrapped in deepest
midnight gloom,
Flowed with cruel, swirling torrent thro' the gorge—a
fitting tomb !
While, like ponderous portals clanging 'twixt these
scenes of death and life,
Boomed the Falls, their bellowing echoes telling of
a ceaseless strife ;
Riven, torn in wildest fury, lashed to foam and clouds
of spray,
Like some clamorous monster raging for its long-
expected prey.

From the shore, in jarring discord with the spirit of the
hour,
Shouts of revelry invaded its sublime, mysterious
power :
Man, the slave of passions rude, in superstition's yoke
enthralled,
Marred the face divine of Nature, by her grandeur
unappalled.
—There they danced in wild carousal, thro' that
glorious moonlit night,
Love and friendship all forgotten, in their orgies' fierce
delight ;
Thinking thus, poor simple children, best the dread
wrath to assuage
Of that Spirit dark, whose roaring told of boundless,
sullen rage.

Hark! a distant shout. Swift following, comes a
momentary hush.

At that sight, their spell is broken. Cheer rever-
berates on cheer,
Till the answering banks re-echo like a scoffing, mocking
jeer.
Louder still their cries redouble, as the skiff with
frightful lunge
Leaps in where the steadier current gathers for its final
plunge.
Passed the head of low-crowned Iris! Luna gleams!—
But what is this?
Why this stillness, broken only by the thunder of th'
abyss?
Why this sudden pause from shouting, and that swift-
averted gaze
To yon point where, circling, eddying past the shore,
the current plays?



*Shooting straight to meet his fellow, lo! a second skiff
they spied.*



Shooting stars in the night sky, as seen from the Earth.



Leaping from the mainland outward, darting, bounding
o'er the tide,
Shooting straight to meet its fellow,—lo ! a *second*
skiff they spied.
Mark the dripping blade flash brightly, scattering drops
of silver light,
As the shallop plunges, lurches, forward urged by
desperate might !
See ! it nears ; they strike !—Defiant, stands a swaying,
stalwart form ;
Poises high the useless paddle ; hurls it at the ravening
storm !
While an arm protecting, shielding, round the startled
maid is flung :—
“'T is her father ! Kwasind ! Kwasind !” bursts in frenzy
from the throng.



* * * *In his tender, yearning eyes,
Clear she reads the pregnant meaning of that love-
wrought sacrifice.*

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Ay ; 't was Kwasind ! Love, triumphant over every
fear and doubt,
Love had won the final victory, putting stubborn pride
to rout.
By that one brief glance at meeting, in his tender
yearning eyes,
Clear she reads the pregnant meaning of that love-
wrought sacrifice :—
Not forgotten, not forsaken, in that lonely, bitter hour !
Then, tho' certain death await her, answering to his
love's strong power
Leaps the light of new-born gladness in her eyes !—
With quickened breath,
Clasped as one, they pass the portal to the shadowy
realm of death.



VI.

EPILOGUE.

AND in after years, at nightfall—still the Indian legends say—

When each swift revolving Autumn brings again that fatal day,

From Niagara's brow, a shallop thro' the dusk is seen to glide,

Stemming with unwavering course the mighty flood's on-rushing tide ;

Till, a jutting headland reached, it swerves, and nears the northern strand,

Where a slight form, dimly shadowed, on the bank is said to stand :

There, its strange freight once embarked, it veers, and downward thro' the night

Bears the spectral, kneeling figure of a maiden robed in white.



*Where in strong love clasped together, father, daughter,
fading sink.*



And as often as the phantom nears the head of
Luna's shores,
From the bank, another shallop leaps to meet its gliding
course ;
Swift by frantic stroke impelled, it intercepts it near the
brink,
Where in strong love clasped together, father, daughter,
fading sink :
And as surely as they vanish, louder roars the Spirit
gray ;
Higher yet, like incense rising, waft the rolling clouds
of spray ;
Whilst the moon, her pale face veiling high in Autumn's
cloud-flecked skies,
Mourns the unending expiation of that cruel sacrifice.

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